

USDAnews

USDA's Employee News Publication—For You & About You!

How We're Enhancing The Security Of Info In Our Office Computers At Our USDA Employee Workplaces

by Ron Hall
Office of Communications

A question for USDA employees: What has a symbol, a number, a capital letter, and a small letter, and goes to at least eight characters in length?

The answer: A USDA employee's individual password for his/her office computer. And, whether or not that answer should have been a no-brainer, the retooling of those passwords was one of several measures which USDA has initiated in recent months to further safeguard the government computers—and their contents—at USDA employee office locations.

What follows is a focus on several of those initiatives.

As a first initiative, in a memorandum titled "Change in Password Policy" and dated March 29, 2006, that was sent to agency-level chief information officers and deputy administrators for management, [then] Chief Information Officer **David Combs** advised that USDA was changing two items related to USDA computer passwords. First, in order to gain access to an employee's USDA office computer, the "password complexity" for that employee's password now must be eight or more characters in length, consist of an "alpha/numeric/spe-

cial character combination (at least one each)," and include upper-case and lower-case letters. In addition, three failed login attempts will now lock that employee out of the office computer for a specified period of time. Second, the "maximum password aging requirements" of those employee passwords were changed from a 60-day time frame, and currently are set at 90 days.

So now it's 17 months since that change went into effect, for all USDA employees at headquarters and field locations both across the country and around the world. How is it working?

"Password security is our first line of defense—and my conclusion is that it *is* effective here at USDA," replied **Mary Heard**, Deputy Associate CIO for Cyber Security.

As a second initiative, a memo titled "Hotline for Reporting Lost/Stolen Government Provided Information Technology Equipment or Media" and dated May 8, 2007, was sent to all USDA employees and contractors. In that memo Combs advised that USDA had established a toll-free hotline number that employees, contractors, and USDA business partners could use to report lost or stolen government-issued information technology equipment such as



Dave Carlson is in the doorway of a 757 aircraft at Orlando International Airport—but he's not getting ready to fly anywhere. He is standing between two air curtains in the aircraft's doorway. As part of a system he helped to develop, he is using those air curtains and heavy blasts of air to keep insects—especially mosquitoes—that arrive on a plane from overseas from leaving that plane and possibly spreading disease in the mosquitoes' 'new country of residence.' Note **Sharon Durham's** story, on this Agricultural Research Service problem-solving effort, on page 4.—**PHOTO BY JERRY HOGSETTE**

laptop computers, personal data assistants, cellphones, and removable storage media such as computer disks or 'memory sticks.' The memo advised that "When calling, be prepared to answer questions regarding the loss or theft, including: who, what, when, and where; what type of information was stored on the equipment; and specifically, if sensitive information was stored." The toll-free hotline number is 1-888-926-2373 and it is staffed 24/7.

Has that hotline number proved its worth so far? "Absolutely," replied **Bryce Eckland**, Director of the Security Compliance Division with the Office of the Chief Information Officer's Cyber Security Office in Kansas City, Mo. "We've generally

been getting up to five calls per week from USDA employees on this hotline number."

He explained that the standard procedure is: when a call comes in from an employee, it is initially handled by the System Network Control Center with OCIO's National Information Technology Center in Kansas City. "Depending on the nature of the loss or theft," added **Gail Phillips**, a senior information technology specialist in OCIO's Cyber Security Office, "OCIO has particular time parameters to meet, to either report this matter to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or to handle it internally." OCIO notifies the employee's agency—specifically the agency's Information System Security *continued on pg. 2...*



Mike Johanns *Secretary of Agriculture*

Dear Fellow Employees, In early August, I had the pleasure of hearing from minority and socially-disadvantaged producers who've had their lives and their businesses turned around through the combined efforts of community and faith-based organizations and USDA employees.

During USDA's 4th Annual Partners Meeting, organized by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR), more than 450 participants exchanged ideas and explored solutions to challenges faced by traditionally underserved farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. Since our first Partners meeting in 2004, the interest and collaboration has steadily increased, with more and more USDA staff and organization leaders getting together to frankly discuss how best to serve the needs of small, beginning, minority, and limited resource farmers.

To a large extent this meeting is about giving administrators and staff the opportunity to hear the concerns of underserved constituents. It is also their chance to explain to those constituents what USDA has to offer and how to get assistance.

Perhaps best of all, it provides an occasion to hear about the success stories that are the outgrowth of employees going the extra mile to reach out to organizations and minority groups to help solve problems. Here are three examples of partnering at its best.

In Arkansas, RD, AMS, and OASCR—through the Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation (ALFDC)—helped minority vegetable growers form a cooperative that now markets products under the American Heartland Produce brand. While RD provided funding to hire the expertise needed and OASCR provided the connections to the right agencies, AMS worked with ALFDC to teach growers how to earn the critical Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices certification. The certification is necessary to successfully market the cooperative's crops and helps growers achieve a uniform

quality and quantity of, in this case, sweet potatoes, squash, peas, and greens.

In Minnesota, FSA worked with the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in America to secure small parcels of land, often less than an acre, to replicate the type of farming they grew up with in Laos and Thailand. Access to land is a major barrier for new and beginning farmers. FSA used its resources and connections to place advertisements in local, state, and regional newspapers asking landowners to rent, lease, or sell farmland to the Hmong farmers so they could continue their farming tradition. Because of those efforts, offers came from all over Minnesota and even Wisconsin.

In North Carolina, for the first time, producers in three counties elected African Americans to local FSA County Committees. These candidates were encouraged and supported by local FSA employees.

Those three examples also show the importance of individual and collective action. Sometimes it pays to let people know you have a problem because it often can be fixed without great expense but with know-how and initiative.

One of our priorities in the next farm bill is to create the means for more success stories by increasing the resources available to underserved producers. Among other things, the Administration's farm bill proposal increases the direct payments by 20 percent for beginning farmers for the first five years of their operation; reserves 10 percent of conservation financial assistance for beginning and socially disadvantaged producers; targets Direct Operating and Ownership loans to beginning and disadvantaged farmers; and increases the statutory loan limit to a maximum of \$500,000. Farm bill debate is far from over and we will continue pressing for these and other improvements.

In the meantime, I want to thank each and every one of you for all the work you do to ensure that all of our farmers and ranchers have access to the programs and services offered by USDA. ■

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Program Manager—who then initiates followup with the employee who reported the incident.

"As part of those subsequent three-way phone conversations," she noted, "our office can talk directly with the 'end-user' employee who has reported the incident. That helps us to ask better followup questions as we try to get all the pieces of the puzzle—and thereby better assess the level of security risk in that particular incident."

As a third initiative, USDA has developed training courses on the general issue of information security awareness, with an emphasis on ensuring such awareness in USDA offices. Training was a government-wide requirement of the Federal Information Security Management Act of 2002. Accordingly, all USDA employees, at headquarters and field locations, have been required to complete those courses—which since 2005 have been made available to USDA employees online through the Department's "Agriculture Learning Service" or "AgLearn."

The March-April 2004 issue of the **USDA NEWS** carried a story on AgLearn.

OCIO information technology specialist **Terri Walker-Cole** explained that the annual required training has included such courses as "USDA Security Awareness and Privacy Basics," "Privacy," and "Security Literacy and Basics."

"During FY 2006, the last year for which we currently have complete figures," she affirmed, "99 percent of USDA employees completed their security awareness training."

As a fourth initiative, in 2002 USDA implemented 'eAuthentication.' "It's a system that provides two features," explained **Owen Unangst**, the eAuthentication project manager with OCIO in Ft. Collins, Colo. "The first is that it manages logins and passwords for over 260,000 users, and that number includes 100,000 USDA employees. The second feature is that it protects 251 USDA web applications."

USDA employees and contractors, for

example, have used eAuthentication when they have taken an official training course through AgLearn. "Additionally," he added, "because many USDA agencies have self-service applications for their customers, eAuthentication provides a unique and secure identification for those customers to access these services."

"At USDA, eAuthentication is a service that is well-ingrained," Unangst pointed out. "For instance, in July 2007, users logged into one or more of the 251 USDA web applications 1.9 million times."

As a fifth initiative, the Department has been examining additional measures to protect what is called "Personally Identifiable Information" or PII. According to **Mary Jo Thompson**, Director of the Office of Special Projects within the Office of Human Capital Management, Personally Identifiable Information at USDA generally refers to information which is maintained by a USDA agency about an individual, including USDA cus-

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Notes *from USDA Headquarters*

Secretary Mike Johanns and his leadership team spent much of July closely tracking farm bill deliberations by the U.S. House of Representatives. On July 26, the House approved a farm bill that incorporates some key provisions of the Administration's farm bill proposal—such as continuation of direct payments, a revenue-based countercyclical payment, increased funding for specialty crops, conservation and renewable energy, and a first step toward the Administration's payment limitation proposal. But the bill also called for a \$7.5 billion tax increase and included \$4.7 billion in what the Secretary described as "budget gimmicks," rather than real offsets. In a speech to the National Press Club on July 27, the Secretary objected strongly to a farm bill paid for by new taxes on another sector of the economy. He said that policymakers and ag groups should not ask other industries to pay more taxes to cover farm subsidies at a time when the need is greater than ever to build support for farm programs. "The fact is there's no need to raise taxes to deliver a good Farm Bill. The Administration has proven with our proposals that we can provide a strong safety net for farmers and that we can fund important priorities like conservation, nutrition, renewable energy, rural development, and our specialty crops," he said. Farm bill action shifts to the Senate in September.

Ames Animal Research Center Dedicated:

Secretary Johanns helped dedicate a new high-containment large animal facility in Ames, Iowa in early July. The center combines three units—ARS's National Animal Disease Center, APHIS's National

Veterinary Services Labs, and APHIS's Center for Veterinary Biologics—into one location. "Construction of this state-of-the-art animal health center is an important milestone in USDA's efforts to provide first-class animal health services," said Johanns. The new building is 155,000 square feet and will house cattle, bison, elk, deer, reindeer, sheep, and hogs. Employees in the new facility will contribute to the nation's \$100 billion livestock industry by conducting research, diagnostics, and training, as well as testing vaccines and evaluating veterinary biological products. A consolidated lab and a low-containment animal facility are still under construction. By 2009, when the project is expected to be complete, the Ames complex will be one of the largest animal health centers in the world with about one million square feet of laboratory and research work space.

National Animal ID System:

In August the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) and the American Angus Association (AAA) agreed to help USDA increase premise registration. A component of the National Animal ID System (NAIS) along with animal ID and tracing, premise registration will enable health officials to quickly respond to an animal health emergency. NMPF and AAA joined the National Pork Board, FFA, and the U.S. Animal Identification Organization, which provide producers the information they need to register their premises and protect their animals. The premises registration component ensures the availability of a nationwide communications network to assist livestock owners and animal health officials in the event of an animal disease. More than



USDA Chief Economist **Keith Collins** (center), flanked by **Marcia Taylor** (right), outgoing American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) Board President, and **Larry Dreiling** (left), Chair of AAEA's Service Award Committee, holds the award he just received—the AAEA Distinguished Service Award for 2007—on July 31 during AAEA's annual convention held in Louisville, Ky. The award has been given out since 1947. According to AAEA Executive Director **Den Gardner**, Collins is the first USDA economist and the fourth sitting USDA employee to receive this award since 1980. "Keith Collins has been a terrific source of information for agricultural editors for decades because of his balanced approach, fairness, accuracy, and knowledge of farm and rural policy," Gardner said. "And he is known as someone who makes sure the people he serves come first."—**PHOTO BY MARILYN CUMMINS**

408,500 premises had been registered by early August.

Census Of Agriculture

2007: The National Agricultural Statistics Service is gearing up to conduct the next Census of Agriculture. A NASS communications campaign is underway to explain the importance to producers of participation. "The Census of Agriculture provides information that is not available anywhere else—information that benefits agricultural producers and their communities in myriad ways," said NASS Administrator **Ron Bosecker**. "For instance policy-makers use Census data for decisions concerning agricultural and rural programs. Community planners use Census information to target delivery of local services. Companies rely on Census data when determining where to locate their operations, and farmers themselves look at Census data when deciding to make changes in their produc-

tion strategies." Census forms, some 39 trailer-truck loads, will be mailed on December 28, 2007. For informational materials to help NASS publicize the upcoming Census call 1-800-727-9540 or go to www.agcensus.usda.gov.

Food Assistance: In July USDA took \$50 million worth of government-owned commodities and began bartering with U.S. food processors for further processed products more suitable for domestic and international feeding program recipients. "Bartering government-owned corn, cotton, soybeans, and wheat for processed products like vegetable oil and flour as well as meat products, will help us meet an increasing demand for food assistance," Secretary Johanns said. The commodities were forfeited to USDA under the Marketing Assistance Loan Program.

—**PATRICIA KLINTBERG**

Employees *make these things happen*

Natural Resources And Environment

We're Expanding The Ways We Predict Smoke From Wildland Fires

The summer wildfire season rages on in numerous troubled locations across the country. One of the many roles that Forest Service specialists provide in responding to wildfires is that they produce daily smoke predictions which help communities determine the areas most likely to be impacted by smoke.

And now an FS meteorologist in Georgia has added a new, more user-friendly format to that assistance.

"We use the 'Google Earth' software application to transform our smoke data into interactive computer animation—and that makes our data more accessible to users," noted **Scott Goodrick**, an FS research meteorologist at FS's Center for Forest Disturbance Science in Athens, Ga. "In other words, we take flat, static maps and link those maps together to produce time-dependent animation. This gives users the control to be interactive and thereby view a geographic area of their own choosing and during a time frame of their own choosing."

He explained that, starting in 1999, FS specialists with the Pacific Wildland Fire Sciences Laboratory in Seattle, Wash., part of the agency's Pacific Northwest Research Station headquartered in Portland, Ore., developed the first tool—in the world—for predicting the movement of smoke. It is called "BlueSky."

According to **Sim Larkin**, the FS research physical climatologist at the Lab and BlueSky

project leader, BlueSky is a computer model that predicts—up to several days in advance—the creation and movement of smoke from wildfires and also from prescribed fires.

"Because of BlueSky we feel we've had a much better sense of where the smoke is coming from and where it's going," Larkin noted.

"We post those smoke predictions daily, and they include information of how much smoke we expect there to be during each hour of the prediction period," pointed out **Brian Potter**, an FS research meteorologist and leader of the Lab's Airfire Team. The posting is on www.fcams.org. "Then state and local health organizations can use this information to help individuals with breathing problems to avoid those smoky areas. In addition, fire officials can access that information when they plan prescribed fires so they won't violate governmental air quality regulations or obscure the views of scenic wilderness areas."

"And now, for the first time, during this fire season," Goodrick affirmed, "we took BlueSky one step further by putting our data into Google Earth. We color our flat, map images so that they look like smoke, and then we overlay those images onto Google Earth's view of the world. Then people are instantly in touch with what they're looking at, smoke-wise." These images are accessible at www.shrmc.org/ge.

Goodrick said that this system offers ad-

vantages over satellite photos that are often used in tracking the path of wildland smoke. "Our system can show what's happening, smoke-wise, closer to the ground," he explained. "Satellite photos often can't provide that information because the view from the satellites can be obscured by clouds or by smoke higher in the atmosphere. Plus, this system can predict where smoke may be in the near future—which a satellite photo, of course, cannot do."

Goodrick said that during this year's fire season, areas of south Georgia and north Florida—which come under his office's area of responsibility—have been particularly hit by wildfires. "Smoke from those fires has impacted major airports and interstates throughout both States, and statewide air quality advisories have been issued," he recounted.

"So we feel that our Google Earth-based smoke predictions proved to be particularly useful when state health officials were deciding to issue warnings for sensitive populations such as infants and children, pregnant women, older adults, and individuals with chronic heart or lung diseases such as asthma."

Goodrick noted that in 2002 the Forest Service created five regional centers to distribute smoke and other weather-related predictions across the country. "Our latest smoke-focused visualization tool," he said, "should be accessible, at those centers nationwide, sometime this fall."

—**PERDITA BELK SPRIGGS**

Research, Education, And Economics

ARS Tests Air Curtains To Keep 'Skeeters Out Of Airplanes

Here we are smack in the middle of 'skeeter season, and when they're not busy buzzing your head before biting your neck, those pesky insects can really travel. But they don't always travel under their own power. Sometimes they hitch a ride inside commercial aircraft—and that can lead to international problems.

However, scientists with the Agricultural Research Service are working on a way to help solve that international headache.

"The blood-feeding requirements of mosquitoes make them ideal carriers of many diseases of humans and animals, and they can pose a threat to public health, agriculture, and the environment," advised **Jerry**

Hogsette, an ARS research entomologist with the Mosquito and Fly Research Unit at the agency's Center for Medical, Agricultural, and Veterinary Entomology in Gainesville, Fla. "In addition, international air travel, plus the mobile nature of the world economy, present serious challenges and responsibilities for those involved in transporting both people and cargo."

So in 2002 officials with the U.S. Department of Transportation approached ARS about finding a way to prevent insects—especially mosquitoes—from getting inside planes. "Our Unit took on the challenge," Hogsette affirmed.

He explained that mosquito dispersal via aircraft has been well documented, as have confirmed cases of airport-originating malaria in Europe. "As far back as 30 years ago,



"Let's change the angle of this air curtain unit in order to improve the air-flow," suggests ARS's Jerry Hogsette (left), as he and Dave Carlson discuss the placement of air curtains at a test facility doorway to prevent entry of insects into the room just inside.—PHOTO BY PEGGY GREB

those incidents led some countries to re-

Editor's Roundup *USDA's people in the news*



Al Almanza is the Administrator of the Food Safety and Inspection Service.

From May 2004 until his selection for this position Almanza served as the manager of FSIS's Dallas District, one of the agency's 15 districts nationwide, which includes more than 350 federally-inspected meat and poultry establishments. From 2000-04 he was FSIS's Deputy District Manager in Dallas, after having served as a special assistant to the District Manager in Dallas from 1998-2000.

Almanza worked as a labor relations specialist for FSIS in

Dallas from 1992-98, after having been a program specialist in Dallas from 1989-92. He worked as a total quality control inspector based in FSIS's Field Office in San Antonio, Texas from 1987-89, after having been a program assistant in FSIS's Area Office in Austin from 1985-87. From 1982-85 he worked as an FSIS processing inspector based in San Antonio. He began his career with FSIS as a slaughter inspector in Dalhart, Texas in 1978.

Barbara Masters, the previous Administrator of FSIS, is now a senior policy advisor with the Washington, DC-based law firm of Olsson, Frank & Weeda, P.C., where she is concentrating on food safety and public health issues. ■



Andrea Brandon is the Deputy Administrator for the Office of Extramural Programs in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

Before rejoining USDA, from October 2003 until her selection for this position Brandon served as the Director of the Office of Grants Policy Division at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Concurrently, from 2004-06 she served as the federal program manager for the governmentwide Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act (P.L. 106-107). She was the special assis-

tant for the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Grants and Acquisition Management at HHS from 2002-2003.

Brandon served as the Director of the Office of Grants in HHS's Office of Population Affairs from 1999-2002. From 1995-99 she was a senior specialist and team leader for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in HHS. From 1993-95 she worked as a grants management specialist with the Food and Nutrition Service in Alexandria, Va., after having worked as a grants management specialist at the National Institutes of Health in Rockville, Md., from 1990-93. She began her federal ca-

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quire the destruction of any insects present on incoming international flights, with pesticides—applied usually by flight attendants while walking down the aisle of a plane containing passengers,” he pointed out. This process is known as “disinsection.”

However, passengers and airline personnel began to complain about the use of those chemical pesticides. So about 12 years ago DOT initiated efforts to convince countries to drop their requirement that flights arriving from overseas be disinfected using chemicals.

There was a need for viable alternatives—and that's where ARS stepped in. In the spring of 2003 Hogsette and since-retired ARS chemist **Dave Carlson** set out to answer the question asked by DOT: could commercially available “air curtains” prevent mosquitoes and flies from entering an aircraft when passengers do.

“We developed a system that relied on fast-moving, outwardly directed currents of air to keep insects from flying into the aircraft,” Hogsette explained. “Our reasoning was: if no insects get *on* the plane, then there's no need to spray passengers before *they* get *off*.” There was a precedent for this: air curtains are currently used by stores, restaurants, and hospitals to keep conditioned air inside and insects outside.

So in the summer of 2003 the Gainesville scientists built a test facility made up of two pairs of windowless, corrugated aluminum

buildings. One building of each pair served as the simulated aircraft, while the other served as the simulated passenger-boarding bridge. By using two complete units, they could test two different groups of air curtains at the same time.

In addition, they selected three species of mosquitoes, each of which has a different host-seeking behavior. “Those behaviors,” Hogsette said, “affect where the insects will be found in proximity to human hosts, and how they may be affected by air currents.”

Furthermore, they included house flies in the tests as a good example of a robust flying insect that is a stronger flier than a mosquito.

The ARS scientists positioned two air curtains, vertically on either side of the test facility doorway—just as they would be at the doorway of an aircraft. They then directed the airflow from the air curtains at a 45-degree angle across the doorway. “The curtains were blowing nearly 6,000 cubic feet per minute—and they prevented 95 to 99 percent of the mosquitoes and flies from gaining access to the test airplane cabin,” Hogsette declared.

“So we concluded that air curtains *can* provide a viable alternative to chemical sprays that currently raise concerns.”

But then the researchers reversed the airflow of the system. “Countries that are concerned about accidental introduction of insectborne diseases,” he advised, “want assurances that any insects that may already

be *on* an arriving plane won't then be getting *off* after the plane lands.”

So they then tested the air curtain's ability to blow hitchhiking insects back *into* the airplane cabin during passenger disembarkation. “We placed net curtains and screen doors across the front and rear service doors of a 757 aircraft at Orlando International Airport to prevent any insects remaining on this test vessel from departing,” he explained. “In the final system, we may use curtains and screens that have been impregnated with safe-to-handle pesticides to ensure that insects on board don't escape.”

“We concluded that the system—that prevents any insects that arrive on the planes from leaving the planes—is ready to test at a commercial airport facility.”

In March of 2004, ARS presented and demonstrated its research at Miami International Airport to a group of dignitaries, mainly from Caribbean countries. Personnel from the ministries of health in several Caribbean countries expressed an interest in trying ARS's approach to prevent insects from escaping from incoming flights.

“Our next step is to work with DOT to encourage other countries to try out our system.”

“A pair of air curtain units only cost about \$1,800, and they are available off-the-shelf from a private sector company,” he added. “This is a fairly inexpensive way to prevent unwanted insects from flying off planes.”

—**SHARON DURHAM**

reer as a secretary at NIH in 1989.

Louise Ebaugh, CSREES's previous Deputy Administrator for the Office of Extramural Programs, retired from that position following 35 years of service with USDA, all of it in the Research, Education, and Economics mission area. ■



Tom Tidwell is the Regional Forester of the Forest Service's Northern Region, headquartered in Missoula, Mont.

From July 2005 until his selection for this position Tidwell served as the Deputy Regional Forester for Fire and Aviation

Management, Recreation, Engineering, State and Private Forestry, and Tribal Relations for FS's Pacific Southwest Region, headquartered in Vallejo, Calif. He was the Forest Supervisor on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest, based in Salt Lake City, from 2001-2005.

From 1998-2001 Tidwell was a legislative affairs specialist in the FS Legislative Affairs Office in Washington, DC, where he worked on the federal government's National Fire Plan, FS's Planning Rule, and FS's Roadless Rule. He began his 30-year Forest Service career in 1976 as a firefighter on the Boise National Forest, and since that time he worked on 7 additional national forests in such positions as district ranger and re-

source assistant.

Gail Kimbell, the previous Regional Forester of FS's Northern Region, is now Chief of the Forest Service. ■



"I just got back on that horse—figuratively speaking, of course—and this time I completed the course."

Sharon Hestvik wasn't talking about some equestrian gallop. She was referring to the fact that, after having been unsuccessful at an attempt last year, this June she successfully completed the "Great Chesapeake Bay Swim." That's a 4.4-mile swim across a particular stretch

of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. The race starts from the shores of a state park located northeast of Annapolis, Md., then continues almost the whole way *between* the two spans of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and then finishes at a small beach on Kent Island, Md. The annual Swim is a charity fundraiser for the Maryland Chapter of the March of Dimes.

Now, USDA's 110,000 employees include a whole lot of folks who are in great shape. In fact, so many employees, located at headquarters and field offices and situated across the country and around the world, run marathons and triathlons that it's no longer a 'Stop The Presses!' moment when yet another

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PROFILE PLUS *More About: Mike Yost*



Mike Yost, Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service, is a farmer's farmer turned policy expert. A fourth generation farm kid, he is as much at home talking about the importance of international markets as he is talking about events influencing prices in domestic grain markets. Yost hails from Murdock, population 300,

located in west-central Minnesota. "I tell folks, I moved from a town of 300 to an apartment house in Virginia of 600," he said.

Yost has been involved in nearly every aspect of agriculture. He grew up on his family's grain and soybean farm, which now includes a small dairy operation and "like all Midwestern farmers we have a small involvement in an ethanol cooperative." He earned a BS in Agricultural Administration at the University of Minnesota.

He traded cash grain for six years for the Pillsbury Company and was a member of the Minneapolis Grain Exchange. He has been a member of USDA's Biotech Advisory Board, USDA/Department of Energy Biomass Advisory Board, and recently served two terms on the National Biodiesel Board. In addition, he is a former Chairman, Vice-President, and President of the American Soybean Association. Throughout this period, Yost, helped by wife **Sandra** and their two sons, also kept a hand on the tiller of Yost Farm, guiding it successfully through the ups and downs typical of the farm economy.

Before being named FAS Administrator in March 2006, Yost served as Associate Administrator for the Farm Service Agency. With responsibility for supervising and administering programs for conservation, disaster assistance, farm commodities, and farm loans, the job was right up his alley.

Today, his portfolio is more diverse. At FAS the charge is to improve foreign market access, build new markets, improve the competitive position of U.S. agriculture in the global marketplace, and provide food aid and technical assistance to foreign countries.

"We are involved in a diverse number of areas. We are working to secure full implementation of the Peru, Colombia, Panama, and South Korea Free Trade Agreements [FTAs]. We want to develop a

system to track compliance with existing FTAs. We have technical assistance and training programs underway in Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, and India. We are working on full implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which calls for two-way trade in sugar to begin in 2008," he said.

FAS also has an international biofuels initiative underway to help gauge where the current enthusiasm for renewable fuels will go in terms of displacing food crops for fuel and/or the effect on exports.

Still the farmer in Yost is thrilled to see the benefits of the biofuels rush on farm income. As a grain merchant, Yost had seen markets favorably influenced by grain demands of the former Soviet Union. So great was its influence that prices would ricochet up or down on rumors that that country was either in or out of the market.

Yost sees parallels to today's price run driven by demand for renewable fuels. "This is the biggest thing to benefit farmers since the Russian trade deal," he said. Still, even with strong demand at home, Yost believes exporters should not ignore trade opportunities in order to maintain U.S. agriculture's strong performance in export markets.

What keeps him going? An inner core tied irrevocably to the land. Yost said, "In our family, farming is a tradition but I also like it. It's very rewarding. Nothing compares to watching a crop grow, harvesting it, and being out there amongst it. It's watching **Mother Nature** at work knowing that you are out there doing something vital."

Last Book Read: *"The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed The World,"* by **John O'Sullivan**.

Last Movie Seen: *"Walk the Line."*

Hobbies: Going back to the farm.

Favorite Weekend Breakfast: The Carlyle, in Arlington, VA.

Priorities In The Months Ahead: "In addition to the work ahead on free trade agreements and other subjects I mentioned earlier, we want to finish our reorganization, which is designed to place the agency in a better position to react and plan strategically reflecting today's issues. It includes developing effective country and regional strategies and the integration of data on tariff and market access to help in the development of trade policy."

—**PATRICIA KLINTBERG**

employee participates in one of those activities. But Hestvik is thought to be the first USDA employee to complete this particular Swim or any comparable aquatic event.

Hestvik, a senior agricultural management specialist with the Risk Management Agency, said she first attempted this challenge in June 2006. "But, due to choppy waves and a fierce current," she recounted, "it was just like swimming in place. Plus, I was trying to not hit the outcrop of rocks near the bridge. I made it into that race for more than a mile, until I had to be brought to shore in one of the race-monitoring boats."

Determined to do better this year, she joined a local swim club. Then, Hestvik swam three mornings a week for eight weeks from April to June at 6 a.m. at an indoor pool in Northern Virginia. She swam one to two miles every practice "plus the occasional three-mile-long swim." She also cross-trained by biking and running, plus completed a local triathlon.

At 9:30 a.m. on June 12, 2007, with the number '138' marked on her orange swimming cap and with a lucky four-leaf-clover wrapped in plastic and stuffed inside her swimsuit—which, in turn, was inside her wetsuit—she and 643 other swimmers got ready to begin this year's "Great Chesapeake Bay Swim"—the 20th annual contest. She was in the first of two waves of 300 swimmers each, which were separated by a 15-minute start time to avoid overcrowding.

"I started the swim pretty slowly to get my rhythm," Hestvik recalled. "But when you're swimming with about 300 swimmers in the first heat, there's definitely more than a bit of arms and legs flailing about nearby."

She said the toughest part of the swim was from mile 2 to mile 3. The current was push-

ing north to south but reportedly was not as strong as in past swims. So she swam straight down the middle between the two bridge spans. Occasionally she'd see other swimmers, but she noted that they were swimming in different areas of the bridges spans.

"Unlike a triathlon, where the other swimmers are seemingly in your face a lot," she explained, "in *this* competition we were generally always spread out, once we got about one mile into the race."

"But about halfway there I started to have a few doubts," Hestvik acknowledged. "I was asking myself, 'Can I hold my pace without tiring out or getting hungry or thirsty? Or will I be swept away by the currents, like last year?'"

And then she remembered what other swimmers had told her: the 4.4-mile swim is really a mental game in your head. "So, once I remembered that—and reminded myself that I *had* trained well for this event—I just put my head down and pretended I was back at the swimming pool, looking at the lines at the bottom of the pool and *not* at the murky Chesapeake Bay."

Once she hit the 4-mile mark, Hestvik thought she was home free. But swimmers say that the last .4 miles are the toughest and longest parts of the whole swim, since the swimmers have to make a left turn and go under the Bay Bridge—usually against the current. "It's probably like Heartbreak Hill right at the end of the Boston Marathon," she speculated.

As she made the turn she could see the land and all the spectators watching from the shore. "Then I got my speed back, and pushed as hard as I could to the finish," she said. She finished with a time of 2 hours and 30 minutes, which was 521 out of the 636

who ultimately completed the race.

What's the first thing she did when she got out of the water?

"After we grabbed some food and liquids, we all congregated in the 'swimmers corral' to get hosed off by volunteer firefighters. Do you know what kind of gritty, murky gunk is in that Bay water?!" she laughed. ■

—RON HALL

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Thompson noted that in May 2007 USDA established a "PII Executive Committee" composed of representatives from the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration, the Office of the Chief Financial Officer, and OCIO.

Jon Holladay, Associate CFO for Financial Policy and Planning in the Office of the Chief Financial Officer, pointed out that the Executive Committee is currently examin-

ing such issues as: inventorying, tracking, labeling as USDA property, and tagging all USDA laptops, both at headquarters and field locations; improving the Department's procedures for disposing of PII data when its use is no longer required for official USDA business; implementing a better system to close the accounts of employees and contractors after separating employment, to ensure the return to USDA of employee office computers, office cell phones, and other USDA hardware; creating a new section on USDA's website and on agency-level web pages devoted to PII issues; using new employee orientation programs to convey messages on the importance of PII; developing a training module for AgLearn on PII; and developing other forms of training on this issue.

"What we're realizing," he said, "is that

we'll want to employ multiple forms of training to better promote employee awareness."

Holladay said that these Executive Committee efforts will ultimately result in the development of Departmentwide policy statements and/or regulations to strengthen and improve USDA procedures relating to these matters. In addition, the PII Executive Committee plans to launch several initiatives to promote to employees the importance of these matters.

"We're improving these practices on behalf of the ultimate goal of protecting Personally Identifiable Information," affirmed Thompson.

"Each USDA employee," she underscored, "has a responsibility to enhance information security at their employee workplace." ■



Secretary **Mike Johanns** (third from right) helps to remove a U.S. Postal Service cloth cover in order to reveal two new series of 4 stamps each—totaling 8 stamps—that commemorate pollination. The unveiling took place during a First-Day-Of-Issue ceremony held on June 29 in the Patio of the Whitten Building at USDA headquarters in Washington, DC. The First-Day-Of-Issue “Pollinator Stamp Series” of 41-cent stamps and memorabilia were then offered for sale in the Patio for USDA employees and members of the public who attended the ceremony. **Kevin Hackett**, Senior National Program Leader for Bees and Pollination in the Agricultural Research Service, noted that this was part of National Pollinator Week—June 24-30, 2007. “The Week,” he pointed out, “was designed to celebrate the role that pollinators—including bees, butterflies, birds, and bats—play not only in pollinating the crops that literally feed the world but also in sustaining our ecosystem.”

—**PHOTO BY BOB NICHOLS**



HELP US FIND Colton Mitchell O'Neal

Missing: 12-22-2006 From: Acworth, GA

D.O.B. 12-28-2001 Sex: Male

Hair: Red Eyes: Blue

Height: 3 ft. 6 in. Weight: 60 lbs.

If you have information, please call

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